

NEWS RELEASE

UP part of global research project exploring colonial legacies of universities



The Old Arts building on the University of Pretoria's Hatfield campus.

PRETORIA - A consortium that includes a principal investigator from the University of Pretoria (UP) has been awarded funding for a project that will research the colonial history of European universities, and explore how these legacies and heritage can be addressed and curated.

The [Colonial Legacies of Universities: Materialities and New Collaborations \(COLUMN\)](#) project brings together nine academic and cultural sector organisations in eight countries. Collaboration with partners from formerly colonised countries is at the core of the project, which sees research around colonial university heritage as a unique opportunity to develop close international collaborations based firmly on rearticulated power relations. COLUMN is co-financed by the European Research Council's [Horizon Europe programme](#) and the [Swiss National Science Foundation](#) for more than €4 million.

“This is the first time that UP’s [Faculty of Humanities](#) has been awarded a Horizon Europe,” said principal investigator [Prof Siona O’Connell](#) of the University’s [School of the Arts](#). “To work with COLUMN colleagues, asking questions about the nature of universities, is humbling. This funding shows what is possible if we all dream big.”

Universities and science, especially in Europe, expanded significantly during the colonial period. Today, the legacy and heritage of this entangled history is encoded in the materiality of many European higher education institutions: buildings are named after contested figures; research collections have a colonial origin; and botanical gardens are silent witnesses of expeditions outside Europe. This project will explore the unique and divergent colonial histories of universities and the contested materialities these have produced.

Unique to this project is the inclusion of partners from Suriname and South Africa as principal investigators in the consortium. Curators from Vietnam, Indonesia, Mexico and other decolonised countries are similarly included as equal partners.

Project leader Gertjan Plets of Utrecht University in the Netherlands said he is glad that initiatives such as the Horizon Europe programme enables scholars to set up a truly global research consortium.

“International collaboration is essential to decolonise scientific heritage and ultimately change the university,” he said.

The project, which runs from April 2025 to March 2029, will see UP collaborating with partners from Surinam (Anton de Kom University), the Netherlands (Utrecht University and Studio Louter), Austria (University of Graz), Switzerland (Geneva University), the Czech Republic (Charles University), Italy (University of Bologna) and Denmark (Aarhus University).

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World](#)

[University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za